

Moses Looks at Life

Sunday, October 10, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Psalm 90

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the
earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or
like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in
the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and
withers.
For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your
countenance.
For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end
like a sigh.
The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and
we fly away.
Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the
fear that is due you.
So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice
and be glad all our days.
Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as
we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to
their children.*

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!

As a young preacher I was richly blessed by insights that do not come to most young people. As a pastor I found myself doing funerals on a regular basis and dealing much more frequently with death than most young adults would normally have to do. Early on in my Christian service I fell in love with a certain passage of scripture which is commonly and appropriately read at funeral services—Psalm 90, the Prayer of Moses—which is also one of our day’s readings. Much like another popular “funeral psalm,” Psalm 23, it can become exclusively associated with times of death and mourning, which is a sad limitation of this reading’s full application to our lives. Moses’ prayer offers comfort at times of grief, but it also offers real insight and understanding to all of us at whatever phase of life we may be in, for it is a wise and practical perspective on life. Let us be blessed by its wisdom.

The psalm begins with comforting words that affirm life and God’s care for us. *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.* Moses’ song may begin with rosy words, but it soon takes on a very grim and gritty tone. Having begun with the joyous affirmation of God being our shelter for all ages, Moses wastes no time in loudly announcing that life is hard! *You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”* God may be our eternal dwelling place, but life on this earth is short and painful. We are mortal, and this harsh truth is presented very directly, and just as the opening words of comfort honor God’s graciousness, the words which follow clearly present God as the One who keeps our earthly lives short! The psalm has a very contentious feel to it. It seems that God and God’s people are locked into a great conflict. To be frank, it sounds as though God is out to get us! What is going on in this strange song?

As is true with any scripture, it must be understood in its context. This poem was written by Moses after he had led the children of Israel through the Exodus from Egypt and through the wilderness for forty difficult years. The Hebrews were a persecuted people whom God had lovingly rescued, but they were also a very unruly people who repeatedly grumbled against God and on more than one occasion openly rebelled against God and Moses! God was repeatedly angry with this difficult rabble and Moses often had to plead for them before God, and this went on for many years. It is no accident that Psalm 90 presents a contentious relationship between God and God’s people. Having looked at this contentious setting of so many years ago and then examining the times in which we now live we must also confess that our nation is not so far from the Hebrews in our own ingratitude, grumbling and lack of faith.

The song presents us with a direct and sobering reminder that life is hard. *For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.... The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even*

then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Life passes quickly. Moses lived to 120 years of age, yet still his time on this earth seemed brief, and those years were full of pain and frustration. Life is hard. Daily experience and a simple look around this earth teaches us this, and it is a reality which we are urged to face squarely. Western Christians in our age do not always take well to such psalms as these, and lament is a part of our faith which we generally ignore. In our affluent and technological age, we are spared so many pains and problems which earlier generations and the poor of the world face. It is tempting for us to see every pain and problem as solvable or avoidable. We become optimists in an unrealistic way. The Bible reminds us that life is hard, but not that we are to become gloomy and to dwell upon that sadness. God invites us to see life as it truly is, and just as we are to give thanks for joys, we are also urged to pour out our sadness over life's painful aspects. When we are honest with ourselves and before God about our hurts and sadness, we find that we no longer feel so alone and lost. Life's sorrows need to be dealt with directly and not ignored, as if they will simply disappear. Moses reminds us that God understands and that though today may bring pain, there is hope for tomorrow. Some hesitate to enter into lament as they feel it is not being faithful to God, but God delights in our pouring out our sorrows and as we lament *to* God, we are less likely to fall into the habit of complaining *about* God behind His back—a practice which God finds most upsetting!

Lament is helpful for the believer as we can become so caught up in a worldly, or even Resurrection optimism that we begin to deny and ignore life's sadness and pain. Some believers, while attempting to be full of faith and hope, can become what I call "top-spin artists." We want so much to be a people of hope and joy that we try to ignore the real and plentiful pains of life and speak only of the joyful possibilities. I shall always cherish the wise words of my mother who told me plainly that "Sometimes life just stinks." Her insight may not sound like wisdom or faith, but properly understood it is right on target and we need to bear those words in mind.

Moses then concludes that portion of his poem with a word of wisdom. Having examined the troubles of this world he offers a wise response beyond the work of lamentation. *So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* In the face of life's frightening brevity let us be honest and realistic. Each day is precious, so do not waste it. Make it count. Moses' exhortation seems to deal with more than the matter of time. It is a word for us to look soberly and honestly at our earthly lives. Don't just drift through life or look only for pleasure. Consider your life and what plans God has for you. Spend life wisely!

Now more than ever we need to be taking a sober look at life. Our modern world of advertising is always convincing us that the beautiful, fun, and happy life is out there if we will only buy the right products and do the right things. Facebook and social media are convincing us that everyone else is having fun all the time and we should be too. Our young people can easily become disappointed as they can more easily fall

prey to unrealistic understandings of life, but we old folks can also fall prey to the world's silly fantasies. I think of the ads put out by retirement communities which make it appear that most seniors are skydiving, motorcycling, and exercising their way to constant excitement. And in a day of countless medical miracle rescues we find it harder and harder to come to grips with the finitude of our earthly days. Moses urges us, not to be blind optimists nor gloomy pessimists, but to take a realistic look at life and plan accordingly. Amen!

Moses deals frankly with life's difficulties, but this is not his only perspective, and he moves on to a more joyful understanding of this earthly pilgrimage. Life is hard, he tells us, but then adds the complementary truth that God is good. He moves from lament to a plea for God's grace and mercy. *Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants*" These words may not sound like what we would call joyous, but they are full of hope. Again, let us consider the context. Here, as at many other times, Moses was pleading for God to be merciful and kind to an unruly nation. God regularly honored Moses' prayers, and so we rejoice when we hear him plead again for mercy and grace. His prayer is little different from the prayers which you and I lift to God on a regular basis. "O God, I have stumbled again! Won't You forgive me and restore me? Won't you help me finally overcome this temptation?" These are the kinds of prayers which we offer to God regularly, and we do so in full confidence of God's loving response. It may sound odd to speak of a confident plea, but this is what Moses offers.

Moses was a man of great hope, and for good reason. The wilderness days were terribly hard, yet he took each footstep with the assurance that it was bringing him closer to the Promised Land. He prayed for gladness to be restored to God's people and asked God's power for the journey and did so with the joyful assurance that these prayers were being answered. Here again, we find that Moses' prayer is our prayer. We pray our way through life's battles knowing that God will find a way for us, and we look forward to a Promised Land.

This psalm, like so much of the scripture, is shot through with a deep pessimism as well as a profound optimism. "So, which one is it?" we ask. Is our faith a pessimistic one or an optimistic faith? We try to reduce the answer to one or the other, but truth be told, Christianity is both, as this psalm explains. The Bible presents a terribly grim picture of the world. Here is where death reigns and all is eventually destined for decay. When Adam sinned, death came into the world to reign. Ours is a deeply pessimistic faith, and as history plainly illustrates, hope cannot be found in trying to restore Eden by our own power. But then comes our loving God and a plan of rescue! By God's grace alone and the saving work of Jesus Christ we are saved. And so we are the greatest of optimists. Resurrection is the last word.

Moses' prayer is a gritty prayer which stresses our troubles, our hope, and the path of wisdom which urges us to make the best of these challenging days. And then at the song's conclusion comes a most amazing prayer straight from the heart of this dear

saint. *Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!* I prefer the Revised Standard translations which renders the verse, *establish thou, the work of our hands.* Here we come to the crux of Moses' prayer and his heartfelt longing. After living out a long and exhausting life pilgrimage from Pharaoh's palace to the wilderness, to plagues and exodus, to the wilderness, to Sinai and back to the wilderness, Moses offered this plea for his life—Let it have been worth it! None of us have had such an exhausting journey as Moses, but all of us can sympathize with his plea and take it as our own. Lord, let my life matter!

I grew up in the 1960s which is remembered as a time of protest and discontent. In those days it was popular to criticize the life of the average suburbanite as being shallow and lacking in real meaning. There is much to be said for that criticism as a life of comfort is not the highest goal for which one should aim. The answers to this criticism which were offered in those days, such as moving to a commune or dropping out of society, were not much better than the problem, but the criticism was sound. This is the kind of discontent that should be a part of the Christian's life.

Moses longed for all his work to not have been in vain, and that should be our prayer as well. As soon as one mentions seeking lives which are of eternal value, one can feel overwhelmed by the task. It may seem that we are to be doing monumental works which will endure for centuries or making ourselves famous so that our name will be recognized for generations to come, but this is missing the point completely. The best insight I know on this matter is from Solomon and is recorded in the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon, the wisest, richest, and most powerful king of Israel, drew to the end of his life and realized that all his accomplishments were meaningless! He built the great buildings and wrote the books, but came to see them as *vanity* and *chasing after the wind*. He looked at the world around him and concluded that we are not remembered by those who follow us, and those who come after us will not be remembered by those who follow! Many find Solomon's words depressing, but they are not hearing the whole of his argument. Having finally realized that earthly greatness is of little value, Solomon came to see the value of simply doing our earthly duties and walking with God, for it is in our relationship with and service to the Almighty that our lives take on true and eternal meaning.

In military cemeteries it is common to see graves marked "Known to God," and this sad inscription tells of a fallen soldier who was never identified. No one will visit that grave and offer the kind of personal tribute which seems so deserved, and this breaks our heart. But see the word of hope! "Known to God." In time, and sooner than we like to think, we will be forgotten by the inhabitants of this earth, but we will be known to God, and that is what truly matters. As was said in ancient times, we will be gathered to our people, and the fellowship shall continue in a new and glorious place. This does not make our present days on this earth meaningless. Quite the opposite! Now is the time to be joyfully pursuing the will of God and the work of the Kingdom, for those

works are ones of eternal value. This has been a sad season as we have recently lost two dear members of the St. Luke's family. Moses invites us to mourn and lament that loss as we should, but he also invites us to celebrate the wonderful works these saints have done and the *eternal* difference which they have made. I see no towering monuments to either Sue or Doug, yet they have left something behind of much greater value. They have each touched and changed many lives through their love and service. That is eternal!

I close with a personal story—a bit of boasting. Not long ago, Kay and I were invited to a party thrown by some wealthy friends. It's great to have wealthy friends and their parties are always such a delight. Let me brag about what we saw and experienced at the soiree. We met family members who shared warm stories and were quick to laugh and to smile. There was a genuine spirit of love and connection among all of them. Age was respected and the children were seen as a delight. I met friends, neighbors and co-workers who spoke of their hosts with a deep fondness. They were grateful to have been touched by these dear people and their lives were richer for knowing them. We also met folks who knew our wealthy hosts because of the kindnesses and works which they had done and given in the community. Again, there was a spirit of love and gratitude among those people. Kay and I were so glad to have been invited into the company of such a wealthy family, for we love the parties that rich people throw, and I will not be shy as I boast of my rich associations!

You have probably already figured out the meaning of this story. These rich friends were no wealthier, at least monetarily, than any of us, but oh they are wealthy! And these kinds of wealthy people are always a joy to be with. I am speaking here of Kingdom wealth, and that wealth is truly eternal. As I look around the St. Luke's family, I see many wealthy people and families. May we continue to accumulate those wonderful riches of love and Kingdom service. I wish you all great riches.

Moses sums it up well in this glorious prayer. Life is short and hard, but God is good, and those who seek to walk with God will find joy and eternal wealth. May we all become wealth seekers in this Moses kind of way.